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INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION TO STUDY, MITIGATE AND MINIMIZE THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE DISASTER AT CHERNOBYL

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INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION TO STUDY, MITIGATE AND MINIMIZE THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE DISASTER AT CHERNOBYL

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report has been prepared in response to General Assembly resolution 45/190 of 21 December 1990 on international cooperation to address and mitigate the consequences of the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant.

II. ACCIDENT AT THE CHERNOBYL NUCLEAR POWER PLANT

A. The accident

2. On 26 April 1986, an accident occurred at the Chernobyl nuclear plant in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, which destroyed unit 4 of the reactor core, resulting in the release of radioactive substances into the environment. Many people died as a direct result of the accident, and many more are reported to have died as a result of containing it and of their involvement in clean-up operations. (The full impact of the accident on the health of the affected population will not be fully known for years to come.) As a further consequence, some 131,000 square kilometres of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, the Ukrainian SSR and the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic became radioactively contaminated to varying degrees. The lives of the inhabitants of the affected regions were severely disrupted; work

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* A/46/50.

at a number of industrial enterprises was halted; and large areas of agricultural and forest land were put out of use.

B. Measures undertaken by the Soviet authorities

3. A Government Commission, headed by the Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers, and including experts in nuclear physics, power engineering, health care, biology, environmental protection, as well as heads of ministries and departments of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and union republics, was established to alleviate the consequences of the accident. A number of important measures have been undertaken, including making initial assessments of the extent of damage and radiation; taking action to prevent further emissions from the damaged reactor; identifying areas exposed to contamination and evacuating inhabitants and farm animals from a 30-kilometre zone (some 116,000 people were evacuated from the high risk zone in 1986); constructing an "encasement" of the destroyed power unit; decontaminating the working area of the plant; undertaking measures to protect water and land resources; decontaminating settlements; stabilizing radiation in the 30-kilometre zone and other areas; constructing housing; organizing and carrying out extensive medical examinations, and establishing dosimetric surveillance of populations and farm animals. Since the accident, over a million people have undergone medical check-ups.

4. Despite these significant efforts, however, it became increasingly clear that the dimension and complexity of the problem were far greater than originally estimated, and that in many respects it was difficult to assess them completely and, therefore, to ensure the safety of the people already affected, or likely to be affected in the future.

5. This realization ultimately brought about a single, State Union-Republic programme of urgent measures to overcome the consequences of the accident, adopted by the Supreme Soviet of the USSR in April 1990. Earlier programmes had been adopted by the Byelorussian SSR for the period 1990-1995, and by the Ukrainian SSR for the period until the year 2000. A similar programme for 1990-1995 has been adopted by the Russian SFSR. An overall coordinating USSR Committee on the Elimination of the Consequences of the Chernobyl Accident was set up, together with corresponding state committees, all charged with organizing and coordinating efforts to address the wide range of critical problems relating to the aftermath of the accident.

6. In addition, a "Concept for Safe Living" was adopted, setting out the criteria for practical measures to minimize the effects of the accident. In the context of this programme, 87,900 people were resettled in 1990, and 119,000 are expected to be resettled in 1991. It is hoped that during the period 1990-1992, a total of 218,900 persons will have been moved to clean areas, and that some 4 million square metres of housing and other facilities will have been constructed by end 1991, with adequate employment opportunities offered in resettled areas.

7. International, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, as well as institutions from the private sector, and individuals, have begun to play a significant role in assisting with the implementation of a number of the measures proposed.

II. INVOLVEMENT OF THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM

8. A number of organizations of the United Nations system were among those which offered cooperation at an early stage. Subsequently, in April 1990, the Governments of the USSR, the Byelorussian SSR and the Ukrainian SSR requested the inclusion of an item on international cooperation in relation to the Chernobyl accident in the agenda of the first regular session of 1990 of the Economic and Social Council. As a result, in May 1990, Chernobyl was a major item of discussion at the meeting of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC). Thereafter, the Secretary-General requested the Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) to prepare a report on activities of the United Nations system in relation to the consequences of the accident, to assist the Economic and Social Council in its deliberations on this item at its second session in the summer of 1990.

9. Thereafter, the Secretary-General launched a fact-finding mission to the affected areas in September 1990, headed by the Executive Secretary of ECE and comprising representatives of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements, the Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator, the United Nations Environment Programme, the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations Office at Vienna and the Department of Technical Cooperation for Development of the Secretariat. Its findings provided the basis of the Secretary-General's report to the forty-fifth session of the General Assembly (A/45/643), which elaborated the activities already under way or planned by the organizations of the United Nations system (notably the International Atomic Energy Agency, the World Health Organization, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). Several of these organizations are members of the Inter-Agency Committee on Response to Nuclear Accidents.

III. GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTION 45/190 AND RELATED ACTION

10. After considering the report, the General Assembly, taking into account the activities by the United Nations system, and recognizing the importance of completing international assessment of the radiological consequences of the accident coordinated by IAEA, the results of which are to be published in late May 1991, adopted resolution 45/190, by which it invited the Secretary-General to formulate a programme for coordinating the activities of the organizations of the United Nations system involved in efforts to address and mitigate the consequences of the accident; entrust one of the Under-Secretaries-General with the task of coordination; establish a task force responsible for stimulating and monitoring activities of the United Nations system; and launch an appeal for voluntary contributions from Member States to complement the

regular budgetary resources used by the United Nations organizations and agencies for alleviating the consequences of the accident.

11. By his letter of 11 March 1991, the Secretary-General informed the heads of organizations and agencies of the United Nations system that he had appointed the Director-General of the United Nations Office at Vienna as United Nations Coordinator for international cooperation to the areas affected by the Chernobyl accident, and requested their fullest support and cooperation. At the same time, notes verbales were transmitted to Member States reiterating the Secretary-General's strong support for the General Assembly's urgent appeal to the international community, and requesting generous contributions for activities to mitigate the consequences of the accident.

IV. ACTIVITIES OF THE UNITED NATIONS COORDINATOR

"Master plan" of assistance requirements

12. Simultaneously, and with the help of the IAEA, UNEP/UNSCEAR and DTCD, the United Nations Coordinator established a small core secretariat in her office in Vienna. She has held extensive discussions there with the authorities of the USSR and the affected areas, and their representatives in Vienna and New York, as to the nature and scope of a "master plan" document of assistance requirements, and submitted an outline to them for guidance. This is to be submitted to a meeting of donor countries, which will be convened on 20 September, in New York, and presided over by the Secretary-General.

13. In these discussions, the United Nations Coordinator reiterated that the thrust of assistance should be on the economic and social consequences of the accident since the radiological and scientific aspects are being covered by the independent international radiological assessment project coordinated by IAEA. It was also agreed that the plan should include concrete, prioritized project proposals, directly addressing urgent humanitarian needs.

14. On 10 April, the United Nations Coordinator dispatched a staff member to Moscow, Kiev and Minsk to cooperate with the All-Union Committee and the Committees of the three affected republics in the further elaboration of this "master plan".

Inter-Agency Task Force

15. Following upon the Secretary-General's letter of 11 March, the United Nations Coordinator wrote on 19 March to heads of agencies and organizations of the United Nations system, informing them of the Secretary-General's intention to establish an inter-agency task force responsible for stimulating and monitoring activities of the United Nations system in relation to the aftermath of the Chernobyl accident, in accordance with paragraph 1 (c) of General Assembly resolution 45/190. The Task Force was formally set up at the meeting of ACC held in Paris from 17 to 19 April at which the United Nations Coordinator presented her progress report.

16. The Task Force has been established at a high level to give due regard to the magnitude of the problem and the wide-ranging and unprecedented scope and nature of assistance required, and to ensure rapid decisions on any policy and substantive questions which may arise. It comprises representatives of those agencies and organizations which, by virtue of their mandates, can provide direct and relevant assistance and advice, particularly in the critical sectors of health, agriculture, environmental and energy planning, resettlement, education and public information, industry and infrastructure. At the time of writing, the membership includes WHO, UNIDO, UNFPA, UNCHS, FAO, DTCD, UNEP and IAEA, but more responses are being received.

17. The Task Force is now closely involved in all aspects of the international assistance effort. Individual project proposals were forwarded to each organization in accordance with its mandate, for technical comments, and views as to their feasibility for execution. A first meeting is to be convened on 24 May to coincide with the presence in Vienna of the representatives of each of the Chernobyl committees set up in the USSR and the three republics, to finalize the "master plan" document.

18. The Task Force will work in close cooperation with the Inter-Agency Committee on Response to Nuclear Accidents to benefit from its technical appraisal of project proposals.

United Nations Coordinator's mission to the USSR and affected republics

19. At the invitation of the Governments concerned, the United Nations Coordinator visited the USSR and the three republics affected by the Chernobyl accident, from 23 to 29 April 1991, accompanied by staff of her secretariat, and one representative each of ECE and UNDP, as well as the Director of the United Nations Information Centre in Moscow.

20. The main purpose of the visit was to come to final agreement with the government authorities, as well as with the Chairmen and senior staff of the various committees established in Moscow, Kiev and Minsk, on urgent remaining action required to finalize the "master plan" document. The timing of the visit also enabled the United Nations Coordinator to represent the Secretary-General on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the accident. Thus on 26 April she delivered a message and appeal at a memorial concert in Minsk, before a live audience and with wide television coverage within the Soviet Union, and in parts of Europe and Latin America.

21. The mission entailed intensive discussions at the highest levels of government as well as technical meetings with the state committees established to address the consequences of the accident. It also included visits to the damaged reactor and to other heavily contaminated areas, as well as to a "resettled" village, and several clinics and hospitals.

22. The visit pointed up in stark terms the many scientific uncertainties still surrounding the Chernobyl question, compounded by the difficult situation with regard to the economy and other local factors. It also brought

acutely to the fore the grievous situation in which the many victims of this accident continue to find themselves, and the severe stress and anxiety to which they are constantly subjected, for health reasons and other less tangible but equally significant factors.

23. All the concerned authorities accepted the "master plan" concept, and the coordinated and concerted approach which it entails, since it presents the requirements for assistance of all the republics concerned. It was also agreed that the views of the non-governmental organizations and the affected communities should be taken into account.

24. The authorities moreover strongly supported the United Nations Coordinator's suggestion that urgent efforts be pursued to ensure that the momentum of media coverage and surge in public interest and concern emanating from the fifth anniversary commemoration be maintained, and that diplomatic representations continue to be undertaken by the Governments concerned with potential donors.

25. A revised and elaborated version of the "master plan" document, supported by individual project proposals, was received in Vienna on 6 May, the deadline agreed during the visit.

Future action

26. The "master plan" will be reviewed and finalized by a working group being convened in Vienna on 21 May, comprising staff of the core secretariat for Chernobyl, as well as one representative from the USSR and each of the affected republics. As indicated in paragraph 17 above, individual project proposals have been sent to appropriate organizations of the United Nations system, and members of the Inter-Agency Task Force have been invited to participate in a meeting to be held in Vienna on 24 May to discuss this document. It is then hoped to circulate it by early June to potential donor Governments for review, in advance of the donors' meeting.

27. Following discussion of the item on Chernobyl at the second regular session of the Economic and Social Council, work will begin on the preparation of the Secretary-General's report to the General Assembly at its forty-sixth session, which will also take into account the outcome of the donors' meeting.

V. CONCLUSION

28. The disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear plant is unique in that, despite the five-year lapse since it occurred, its consequences are still not clear and will not be fully known for many years to come. The accident has, moreover, an international dimension not only because its insidious effects have transcended national boundaries, but also because there are important lessons to be learned from its aftermath by countries world wide.

29. It therefore follows that actions undertaken in response to General Assembly resolution 45/190 constitute only the beginning of a continuing and constantly evolving process. The decision adopted by ECE in April 1991, which endorses the basic tenets of the resolution, is an important step in this regard. However, the extent to which effective international assistance of the magnitude required can materialize will obviously depend upon the willingness of the international community as a whole to respond to the needs brought on by the Chernobyl disaster, the impact of which will continue to be felt for years to come not only by those immediately affected, but also by the world at large.

30. It is therefore hoped that potential donors - Governments, non-governmental organizations, institutions, the private sector and individuals alike - will respond and give practical and financial support to the implementation of the "master plan", notwithstanding the other many demands on their resources.